

# An Interview with Terry A. Osborn

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## Abstract

*In this interview with Terry A. Osborn, whose work set the stage for the momentum that is currently building around social justice in language education, Dr. Osborn shares his perspective on the past, present, and future of language education.*

**Key Words:** *social justice, critical pedagogy, language education, advocacy*

As part of this special issue of *Dimension*, we present an interview with Terry A. Osborn, whose books have set the stage for the momentum that is currently building around social justice in world language education in the United States. At the time of the interview, Dr. Osborn was the Interim Regional Chancellor and Regional Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs at the University of South Florida, Sarasota-Manatee. An internationally recognized scholar of critical language studies who has published 13 books and 34 articles and chapters, edited 6 academic book series, and was the founding co-editor of the journal *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, he has also been faculty at the City University of New York, the University of Connecticut, and Fordham University.

Stacey Margarita Johnson, the co-editor of this special issue, caught up with Dr. Osborn in the summer of 2017 to discuss the state of social justice in language education.

**Stacey:** In the 12 years since you published *Teaching World Languages for Social Justice* (2006), what changes have you seen in the field of language teaching?

**Terry:** I should start by saying that my views that I express do not necessarily represent those of the University of South Florida, because when I am dealing with critical theory, those views are a bit controversial in some cases. I am speaking as an academic. I am not speaking as an administrator of this institution where I currently hold an administrative post.

I think there have been a lot of differences that have happened since the publication of this book. When I started writing this—in 2003 is when I started writing the book—there was a very limited amount of work that had been done in the area of social justice in foreign language teaching. Really, most of the critical, theoretical type of work or social justice type of work had been done in ESL. TEFL had also done a lot of it. We had not done so much in foreign language education in the U.S.

My concern as an academic was that we were treating foreign language education as a byproduct of our understanding of second language acquisition. Second language acquisition was understood largely as a natural process that was the same for every human being across the planet. Although that may very well be true, the

fact is that, even though the process may be the same, the contexts are very different.

For me, the epiphany came probably back in the late '90s, when I was in Istanbul working as a consultant to develop an English for Special Purposes program at Istanbul Technical University. Essentially, they wanted their engineers to be able to speak English because it was important for them in their job market. They did not need to approach foreign language education like we do in the United States, where they talk about hobbies, weather, and all that. They just needed them to know how to talk about engineering topics. There was a real freedom in designing that curricular approach for me because I was not following the usual US foreign language curriculum.

I had been reading some of the works of Michael Apple at the time. I went into the faculty lounge over there. I sat down and thought about my experience as a high school language teacher, thought about, as a foreign language educator, what we did in the United States. I remember thinking, "If you tried to design a system of foreign language education that would not result in bilingual students, you would have a hard time coming up with a better design than what we have in the United States."

It was that moment where the epiphany hit.

Obviously, there are nuances. I am overgeneralizing here, but we believe that languages are best learned early in life. I know that there are more FLES [Foreign Language in the Elementary School] programs now than there were back in 1998, but it was the exception rather than the rule 20 years ago. My joke that I tell students is, "We know that you learn best prior to puberty, so we start formal language learning about half an hour after puberty starts."

If you ever take a look at the Foreign Service Institute numbers as to how long it takes for a student to learn a particular language, you see we know how many hours it takes for you to learn a language. Back then we usually required two years. Now, I think three is more normal. Our own data show us how many hours it takes. And then we make sure we give you fewer than that.

Again, a person begins to think, "Why do we have an education program design that, based on our own information, is so faulty that it is, more or less, predestined to fail?" The conclusion, having read the critical theory work, was that we actually did not want it to succeed in creating a bilingual population. Well, why would we not want to have a bilingual population? Ah, now, one starts to put some thoughts together.

If we had a bilingual population, what would happen to the power structures in society? If I could move here from any country in the world, and somebody on Capitol Hill spoke my native language, how would the power structures in the US society shift? Who would lose power versus who would gain power?

You start to see that many in power really do not want a bilingual population.

What has happened since 2005 is that this previously taboo conversation in our field has started. It has exploded. Now, I see not only articles on social justice, but I see special issues. I see special interest groups. At the most recent ACTFL, in Nashville, there were several sessions on social justice in foreign language teaching. For me, it is very, very exciting. We still have a long way to go, but it is really exciting to see those changes.

**Stacey:** What changes are needed in the field to move toward a more inclusive, democratic society through language learning?

**Terry:** Philosophically, the first problem is that we have married ourselves so closely to logical positivism. There are three ways in education we go about understanding epistemology or knowledge.

The first is to assume that all knowledge is neutral. In other words, it is just knowledge. There is no bias in it. It is all divisible. If I understand how the component parts of the larger phenomenon work, then I can understand the phenomenon. It is constant. It never changes. The way an airplane flies today is the way an airplane flew 30 years ago, and it's the way it's going to fly 30 years from now.

I think what we have done historically, or at least in my lifetime, is approached foreign language education from the same point of logical positivism. If we can figure out how languages are acquired and we can isolate the different sub steps, if you will, or steps to language acquisition, then we can control the circumstances that we need to control so that students can learn language. I think that is problematic. For our field, it has some validity, but it is also very, very misplaced in another way.

Let me talk about the validity first. Physiologically, it is correct. The way in which language is produced by all human beings across the planet physiologically is a natural phenomenon, can be broken down into component steps. Again, physiologically, logical positivism makes a lot of sense. The problem that foreign language education has is the same problem that education has, which is that, once we try and come up with a grand formula for learning, we begin to really fall short.

One of the other ways in which we approach epistemology or knowledge is we look at naturalism or interpretivism, the idea that every human being encounters truth differently. Just because something is true for you doesn't make it true for me. This one is not without its problems. Truth is constructed by each individual differently. Truth being constructed by each individual differently leads to different outcomes.

Moving forward a step more, when we begin looking at epistemology a third way – and this is how I tend to talk about critical theory – we start to look at the fact that knowledge is based on power relationships.

Here is an example that language teachers usually will relate to. When we take a look at a dictionary, a dictionary either prescribes the way a language is used, or it describes the way a language is used. The question is, who owns the language? If the language is owned by academics, then we can claim authority to prescribe. If we write the dictionary, we can claim the full authority to prescribe the way language is used. If language is owned by the native speakers of that language or even the non-native speakers, then all a dictionary really does is describe how humans use our language.

When you start getting into those kinds of questions, you start to realize that even language features like grammar, even conjugation and vocabulary, all demonstrate evidence of a power struggle. The word you choose to use depends upon the sociological context in which you are speaking. Contexts have great impact on simple vocabulary and grammar choices.

What do we need to do in terms of moving the field?

What we have to do is we have to recognize that, yes, there is a role for logical positivism in language study. That is that physiologically we produce language the same way regardless of who we are. Sociologically, language is shaped by the context in which it is used. Those contexts are constant sites of struggle. What we as foreign language teachers have to understand is that we cannot continue to present language as being neutrally and naturally defined.

In a French class, just because the Académie says something is the proper language use, does not make it the proper language use. The Académie makes one claim. What we need to do as language teachers is provide counterclaims.

We will say in broad sweeping terms that all people in Mexico celebrate the Day of the Dead, but in fact, that is not true. There are a lot of people in Mexico who do not celebrate Day of the Dead. They have reasons for not celebrating it. We do not present that as part of the tapestry of what life in Mexico is like. You can take this example and put it anywhere you want in the places that we talk about in foreign language classrooms. What we do is to present essentially a caricature of target cultures. We present a caricature of the users of that language. We paint them with broad strokes in such a way that is intellectually dishonest.

I always am reminded of the person from Germany who learned English from British speakers of English, then came to the United States. When meeting somebody, giving a greeting, he said, "How do you do?" The American looked at him and said, "How do you do what?" We have to challenge our own way of approaching our own subject because we are part of the problem.

I have said in my writing before and I will say it again, language teaching is a political act. Until we embrace and understand what that means, I do not think we are going to be able to move the profession as far as we otherwise will.

### **Stacey: How can we as teachers gain support for foreign language education?**

**Terry:** I want to talk to you a minute about how we are going to gain support in US society specifically. Most people walk out of foreign language classes in school and say, "That was awful. I do not know what that was for. I sat there for three years. I did not learn anything. I hated it. Maybe I learned a little, but then I went overseas and realized I did not know anything." They have gone through an experience that was largely unsatisfactory. As far as their daily life is concerned, it is essentially irrelevant. We are the ones who made it irrelevant because we focused on the wrong things.

We focused on teaching them as though they were going to travel to, for example, Spain. The reality is most of our students do not. Most of our students will not travel outside the US. We have made the language that we are teaching them foreign to their experience, foreign to their daily lives. Therefore, when we go back and ask for support for more foreign language education, who is going to say we need more of that? In their mind, that was a waste of my time. Why would I put more money into putting kids through that?

There has to be a multi-generational project among language educators that is going to outlast you and me. Go several generations down, of shifting what we do in language education in the United States to make it more relevant because it is absolutely relevant to the lives of people in the United States. You and I both know that. So does everybody who has anything to do with foreign language education.

I taught German in Northwest Georgia for six years or so. I would tell them about Germany. I would talk to them a little bit about World War II, and World War I, and all these things. I was about 60 miles from Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. All I knew was that it was a small town up there, and it had a Confederate battlefield. What I did not know until years later, was that Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia was the site of an internment camp for German speaking resident aliens during World War I. Here I was 60 miles from a place where I could have explained to the students that, because of the language they spoke and our xenophobia, we rounded up the Germans and put them into an internment camp here.

There are many of these kinds of stories. You can go around the country and you can talk about the history of language diversity in the United States. Today, you can start talking about the speakers of Spanish in the United States. What are their lives like as linguistic minorities here in the United States? What are the struggles that they have?

**Stacey: What can we do to help move the field forward in implementing critical pedagogy in social justice approaches?**

**Terry:** This one is pretty straightforward. There are three things: We have to try, we have to share, and we have to advocate.

The thing is, there is no map for this. There is this wonderful book about a dialog between Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. Myles Horton was the founder of the Highlander School. Of course, we know who Freire is. *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990).

**Stacey: It's one of my favorite books.**

**Terry:** I think that book title is exactly right. We need to make this road by walking it. We are not going to be able to come up with the grand formula for critical pedagogical or social justice teaching in foreign language education.

The reason we want to do that, Stacey, is because our field is so tied to logical positivism that we want to go back and find the formula. We want to know, "Tell us, how do we do this? We start with day one, day two..." That is the way we think because that is all we have been taught in our field.

What we have to do is shift our thinking. There is no grand formula. We make this road as we walk it, so what do we do? We start walking. That is it. We start walking.

Obviously, as a person who is in a school district and you don't have tenure, you are probably not going to want to start a revolution as the first thing that you do. What you can do is start by showing both sides of the story. You can start by saying you noticed in this town people who are linguistically diverse. What do you notice about them? Where do they live? What kind of jobs do they have? Do you have any idea of the struggles they must face? Did you read anything in the paper about things that are going on? Just raise an awareness of linguistic diversity in the United States, contemporary linguistic diversity.

Try some things. Learn some things from the conferences. Learn some things from the books that are out now. Share your experience with other language teachers.

Talk about, “When I tried this, it worked. When I tried this, it did not work. I tried this and modified it.” We have to build a network of people sharing with each other.

Finally, wherever possible, we have to advocate. We have to advocate in all of our professional organizations. We have to advocate in our school districts. We have to advocate wherever we can to change the shape of foreign language education.

Then, watch how the road evolves as we walk on it.

**Stacey: What one piece of advice would you give to new language teachers to instill social justice in the curriculum?**

**Terry:** Never present knowledge in a way that is what I call monovocal.

Never present knowledge about the language or about the culture, particularly the culture, as having a single unified voice because, in fact, that is just not true. There is no place on the planet where everybody is in absolute agreement about everything and there is one story to be told. Particularly when it comes to language diversity, that is true.

I can go to Germany and I can talk about the Germans all speak High German. I can say the Germans all celebrate Christmas. I can do all of that. I can overlook the Turkish guest workers. I can overlook the fact that the Jewish population is nowhere near it once was because of historical reasons for that. I can overlook all of those other parts of struggle that have resulted in what we have in that society today. In so doing, I am reinforcing, in my opinion, an intellectually dishonest view of culture and, quite honestly, of language. I am not doing the field of language teaching any service. In fact, I am working against myself.

**Stacey: What type of resources are available to support teachers in their transition to a social justice approach?**

**Terry:** I think conferences are where a lot of this is happening more and more. Get into a room with people who share those value commitments. That really is the best resource; just share with colleagues who are trying to move in that same direction.

It is amazing to see this profession that we care so much about shifting in such a positive direction. It really is very...exhilarating is probably the word I would use.

**Stacey: At the risk of sounding too effusive here, I think that a lot of us who are currently doing this work, for instance with the ACTFL special interest group or writing these articles, we look back on *The Foreign Language Educator in Society* (Reagan & Osborn, 2002) and *Teaching World Languages for Social Justice* (Osborn, 2006) as foundational texts. There are a lot of other texts that came out of TESOL/TEFL that were really influential, but those two books affected a whole generation of people. Maybe you're just starting to see the fruit of the work you did 20 years ago.**

**Terry:** I appreciate that a lot. I really do. It is very rewarding to have been a part of it.

**Stacey: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. It was just a thrill for me.**

**Terry:** Thank you, Stacey. I appreciate that. I am very grateful for all the work of the next generation of scholars who have taken up social justice. Thank you.

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